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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ES](#)
SUBJECT: FUNES TAKES PRESIDENCY IN SMOOTH, EFFICIENT
ELECTION

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: (Left-wing) Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) candidate Mauricio Funes has won the presidency of El Salvador. Funes claimed victory at approximately 9:30 PM local time, after 90 percent of the votes had been counted. As of the morning of March 16, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) was reporting that 99.38 percent of the votes were in, and Funes led 51.3 percent to 48.7 percent. Charge spoke with both candidates on Election Night after the results were clear. Both candidates expressed optimism about the future of U.S.-El Salvador relations, as did Charge in comments to media. Election Day proceeded smoothly, largely without incidence of violence. The TSE corrected most of the logistical problems that occurred in the January legislative and municipal elections. A 5,000 plus member domestic and international observer effort, including a 70-person Embassy team spread throughout the country, helped ensure a free and fair electoral process. Funes as President presents both challenges and opportunities going forward. End Summary.

FUNES WINS WITH 51.3 PERCENT

¶2. (C) FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes has won the presidency of El Salvador. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) announced that over 90 percent of the votes had been counted at approximately 10:00 PM local time on Election Night, March 15. Funes led (center-right, pro-U.S.) Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) candidate Rodrigo Avila by a 2.6 point spread (51.3 percent to 48.7 percent), which was enough to call the race in Funes' favor. Funes declared victory at 9:30 PM. By that time, Central American University's Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP) had received a large enough and representative sample from its quick count effort (supported by USAID and NDI) to reduce the margin of error to less than one percent, enough for the group to have full confidence in its results. NDI told us at 9:30 PM that IUDOP was ready to deliver the results to the TSE. As of the morning of March 16, the TSE is reporting that it has accounted for 99.38 percent of the votes, and is still saying that Funes' lead is 51.3 to 48.7 percent. The TSE also says there were 2,630,137 valid votes cast, representing 62.2 percent of eligible voters.

¶3. (C) When the TSE results reached the 90 percent level, Charge spoke by telephone with Rodrigo Avila, who confirmed that President Saca had called Funes to congratulate him on his victory, and that ARENA had accepted defeat, and was making preparations to publicly concede.

CHARGE MEETS WITH BOTH CANDIDATES ON ELECTION NIGHT

¶4. (C) The Charge then met with President-elect Funes. Funes said that he hopes to have a strong working relationship with the U.S., and that he wants to "get to know the U.S. government." He also noted that he was looking forward to Assistant Secretary Shannon's visit. Funes said Brazilian President Lula had called to congratulate him on his victory.

Also present was FMLN legislator Hugo Martinez, a likely candidate for Foreign Minister, who discussed pragmatically with Charge the many issues of bilateral interest.

¶5. (C) After meeting with Funes, Charge attended Avila's concession speech. During the speech, Avila said he wanted ARENA to be a constructive, active opposition and congratulated Funes on his victory, noting that this was all part of a democratic system. Afterwards, Avila told Charge that he knew he had a responsibility to accept defeat honorably, much as he promised he would do when we discussed possible election outcomes with him on Friday morning.

ELECTION RUNS SMOOTHLY WITH STRONG OBSERVER PRESENCE

¶6. (SBU) The electoral process was smooth, and largely without incident. The TSE was well-organized, and successfully avoided many of the logistical problems it had during the January 18 legislative and municipal elections. There were over 5,000 accredited domestic and international

observers in the country for the election, and early reports are consistent with the Embassy team's observations: the elections were free and fair, with minimal irregularities. The Embassy fielded a team of 70 observers, who were scheduled to visit 80 percent of the municipalities in the country (210 of 262). Observers reported extra Unique Identification Document (DUI) scrutiny by election officials.

Many rumors of attempted DUI fraud had been circulating leading up to the election, but observers saw little evidence of it. There were some disputes over DUIs, but the Office of the Attorney General was present and visible at most voting sites to resolve those problems.

¶7. (SBU) Most polling sites opened on time throughout the country. One of the chief complaints of election observers in January was that polls opened an average of one hour late.

Observers relayed scattered reports of ARENA supporters trying to intimidate voters and claims of foreigners trying to vote, but those were isolated cases. News daily La Prensa Grafica reported March 16 that the National Civilian Police (PNC) arrested 30 people who were allegedly foreigners trying to vote. These cases were mostly in the interior regions of the country. Embassy election observers in the border regions reported no claims of foreigners attempting to vote. There were no credible reports of foreigners being bused into the country to vote, which had been one of the FMLN's claims of impending ARENA fraud in recent weeks.

¶8. (SBU) The election proceeded essentially without violence.

Despite a much higher volume of voters, the morning went smoothly. In the late afternoon, the Embassy began receiving swirling rumors of violence developing, but none of them resulted in specific reports of election-related violence. We did note large numbers of FMLN supporters rallying on the streets of San Salvador as the votes were being counted. Police were concerned they would riot if the results did not go their way. In the end, they partied in the streets late into the night.

¶9. (SBU) There was one report of an ARENA member assaulting an IUDOP domestic observer. News daily El Diario de Hoy reported March 16 that an ARENA activist was shot and killed by gang members while coordinating an election transportation effort. The victim had reportedly recently received threats from gang members and the FMLN. An ARENA official claimed

the killing was a political murder, but authorities have yet to comment on the motive.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The election is potentially a momentous occasion in the maturation of Salvadoran democracy. A peaceful transition of power to the opposition party will represent another step away from the violent history of the Salvadoran civil war. That said, the loss is a big shock for ARENA. The party will need to regroup and partially reinvent itself to shed its "insider's club" image going forward. Based on Avila's comments in his concession speech and the fighting spirit still on display in the party, we expect ARENA to become an assertive opposition party.

¶11. (C) The FMLN in power is uncharted territory in El Salvador, and presents challenges and opportunities. However, the relationships fostered by the Embassy with the FMLN over the last 18 months place us in a good position to work constructively with the new administration. We said that to Funes and his team on Election Night, and to media as well.
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